



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Sickle Cell Anemia

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 150 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

What is sickle cell anemia?

Sickle cell anemia is a serious blood disease. People with sickle cell anemia have red blood cells shaped like sickles (☾) instead of discs (●). These sickle-shaped cells can clump together and block small blood vessels. Babies and young children who have sickle cell anemia get infections easily, and can get very sick.

How do people get sickle cell anemia?

People get sickle cell anemia by inheriting two sickle genes — one from each parent. (Genes, which you inherit from your parents, control things like the color of your eyes and whether your hair is straight or curly.) In other words, the only way to get sickle cell anemia is to be born with it.

Is sickle cell trait the same as sickle cell anemia?

No. Sickle cell trait is **not** a disease. People with sickle cell trait are healthy because they have only one sickle gene. (People who have sickle cell anemia have two sickle genes.) Sickle cell trait can **never** turn into sickle cell anemia.

Who gets sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait?

In the U.S., most people who have sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait are Black. Hispanic, Greek, Italian, Arab, Egyptian, Iranian and Asiatic Indian people sometimes have sickle cell anemia or trait, too.

Can you catch sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait?

No. It is impossible to catch either one. Anyone who has sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait was born with it.

Is there a cure for sickle cell anemia?

Right now there is no cure. But **with special medical care**, people with sickle cell anemia can live long lives. For babies and young children who have sickle cell anemia, the most important treatment is penicillin. Taking penicillin every day can save their lives by keeping them from getting so many infections. Penicillin also makes the infections they do get less dangerous.

How can you tell if your baby has sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait?

A blood test can be done after your baby is born. There is also a special test that can tell if a baby has sickle cell anemia before it is born. Both of these tests can also tell you if the baby has sickle cell trait. Ask your doctor about these tests.

Why should babies be tested?

Babies that have sickle cell anemia look just like other babies, so no one can tell which ones have it just by looking. Sometimes, people don't find out that their babies have sickle cell anemia until after they get very sick with infections. If babies are tested right away, doctors can tell who has sickle cell anemia and give them penicillin before they start getting infections.

Should adults be tested too?

Yes, adults should be tested for sickle cell. If a man with sickle cell trait and a woman with sickle cell trait have a child together, their baby might be born with sickle cell anemia. The parents and the baby's doctor should know this ahead of time so they can make plans. If you want to be tested for sickle cell trait, ask your doctor about the blood test.

Where can you get more information?

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Genetics Program (617) 727-5121 or 727-5125

Boston Sickle Cell Center (617) 424-5727

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GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS
SEP 19 1989
JANUARY 19 1989
BOSTON